

# GROWERTALKS

## Features

8/15/2009

### It's On at OFA

*Ellen C. Wells and Chris Beytes*

If you skip out on the OFA Short Course—the industry's preeminent annual trade show and educational series—because you think it's the “same old, same old,” then it's time to rethink. In fact, “Rethink” was the unofficial rallying cry heard at this year's Short Course—rethink how to cut costs, how to produce and manage more efficiently, how to sell better, and how to provide the items in demand.

The economy—dismal for many sectors of American and world markets—didn't have quite the negative impact on the horticulture industry as most of us had prepared for. In fact, many conversations at this year's Short Course revolved around just how recession-proof (or at least resistant) the horticultural markets can be in a down economy. One gentleman even commented that not only is our industry recession-proof, we can thrive in a down period.

The demand for horticultural products is out there—along the entire length of the supply chain. In casual conversations with suppliers of everything from plug trays (T.O. Plastics) to lighting (P.L. Lighting) to benching systems (Maine Bucket), reports of this year's business have been good, even strong. For instance, according to Marthe Galbraith of Pride Garden Products, the company has had a strong year and continues to book orders for its container gardening baskets for next spring as well as for coming fall. Whether this sentiment about a successful season is coming from actual business or from a thankfulness that we're not in the car industry, that's hard to say. Nonetheless, the general attitude on the trade show floor this year was definitely positive. And a big portion of a successful business is attitude.

A positive attitude on the future is what brought attendees to this year's Short Course to learn, to buy and to network. Attendance numbers for 2009 mirrored those for 2008, according to official OFA counts.

“We're very pleased that despite the challenging economic times and the difficult choices industry members are having to make, that approximately 9,000 people attended the OFA Short Course to receive the very best in education, networking and exhibiting opportunities,” says Laura Kunkle, OFA's director of membership and communications.

In speaking with vendors and exhibitors who have attended other trade shows throughout the year, the consensus seems to be one effect the economy is having on the horticulture industry is that companies are bringing slightly fewer employees to the events. This year's attendees aren't kicking tires—they're having

serious discussions with vendors, making deals and placing orders. A few of the vendors I spoke to even said the economy has jolted some in the industry into realizing the ill effects that a laissez-faire attitude can have on the bottom line and bettering their business practices. Perhaps a bad economy is good for business, after all. —Ellen Wells

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### **Retail sessions help “rethink”**

The desire to “rethink” was apparent in the educational sessions. By all accounts every seminar, panel discussion, workshop and tour was jammed, with standing-room-only availability in many cases. Contributor John Friel found several of this year’s grower- and marketing-related seminars to have some fairly useful information (see “Confessions from a Seminar Seat” on page 63). On the retail side of the educational offerings, garden retailers packed the rooms to learn new techniques, exchange ideas and make plans of their own. Some of the highlights from this year’s retail-related sessions include:

**The ABCs of Store Signage.** It’s hard enough to fill the seats of an 8 a.m. educational session, let alone on a Sunday. But this trio—the indomitable garden center consultant and Green Profit columnist Judy Sharpton, garden retail’s Queen Mother Evelyn Weidner and corporate-turned-garden-retail marketer Dan Truesdale (Rolling Green Nursery)—had no trouble packing the room for this session. Its highlight was Dan’s One Voice concept of store signage and branding, which he developed while working in corporate America, brought to his position at Rolling Green Nursery, and is now presenting industrywide.

**Hot Shots: Ideas from Traveling Retailers.** Charlie Cole (Cole Gardens), Stephen Barlow (Barlow’s Flower Farm) and Kate Terrell (Wallace’s Garden Center) teamed up to provide a filled room with display and event ideas they’ve implemented themselves or have seen on the road. For example, joining two area garden clubs was “the best thing I did last year,” Charlie says. For Stephen, turning your typical end-of-spring impatiens sale into “Impatiens Palooza” did the trick in getting customers in the doors, interested in impatiens (and more) and buying them. For Kate, a simple trick to put shoppers in the Christmas spirit is to paint a winter scene on a modular wall creating a festive backdrop for displaying artificial trees. Retailers in the room were busy jotting down the panel’s proven suggestions, and even contributed variations of their own.

**Retail Idea Exchange.** As if a long Sunday of seminars and trade show walking wasn’t enough, approximately 100 retailers headed to the Retail Idea Exchange for a two-hour-long after-hours session. The Exchange offers the increasingly popular format of learning by interacting and sharing within and between groups. Some of this year’s ideas that participants scribbled on their to-do lists include: “first time visitor” business cards with free offers; establishing relationships with local media; offering garden center space for charity events; and a “happy hour” with daily specials (garden products, not booze!).

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### **OFA Merchandising Contest**

The new-for-2009 Merchandising Contest could very well be the most fun event ever held at Short Course—it was certainly the surprise hit of the show. The competition pitted visual merchandisers against each other to create themed retail displays within 45 minutes. Think “Food Network Challenge” but with garden center goods.

The competitors included Scott Daly, visual merchandiser for Homestead Gardens, Davidsonville, Maryland (sponsored by Green Profit); Murphy Hendy, visual merchandiser for A Proper Garden, Delaware, Ohio (sponsored by Today's Garden Center); Tina Bemis of Bemis Farms Nursery, Spencer, Massachusetts (sponsored by Lawn & Garden Retailer) and Dan Truesdale, Rolling Green Nursery, Greenland, New Hampshire (sponsored by Garden Center magazine). The contestants had a blast transforming barren space into beautiful displays as fans and onlookers snapped photos and learned new techniques.

The winner of the OFA Merchandising Contest was Murphy Hendy, who narrowly edged out Tina Bemis in the finals. Scott Daly, our competitor, took home the People's Choice Award for his stunning creation of what he calls an "eccentric gardener's potting bench." Scott is truly a retail artist, and I appreciate greatly his efforts on behalf of Green Profit. Thank you, Scott!

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### Newsorthy Notes

We ran into Pam Temko, Dosatron USA's vice president of sales and marketing, at the company's booth, where she introduced me to their latest injector, the Diaphragm DM11F. The injector is designed specifically for situations with poor water quality. "And with its low price," Pam adds, "it's an excellent way for smaller operations to move from Hozon siphons to a more accurate injection system."

Suzanne Di Staulo, U.S. sales manager for Braun Horticulture, was excited to show off the new products in their booth, such as the birch bark baskets and the Urban Collection of galvanized metal containers. But Braun's really big news is that they're now offering a line of their own classic and functional display pieces. Braun has had so many requests during trade shows for their rustic-looking display pieces that the company decided it was time to offer them to customers. Retailers will soon be able to purchase adjustable basket and pot racks, five stacking shelves, rustic screens, a three-tiered ladder shelf and even an old English-style wheelbarrow. Rumor has it that Braun's trademark "barn" backdrop will also be available sometime in the near future.

Also new from Braun is a branded program to accompany their line of little black pots—Every Plant Deserves a Little Black Pot. A play on a woman's must-have "little black dress," the program is supported with branded gift bags with tags, signage bench tape and cards.

The hot item in the Green Leaf Plants booth was the new dwarf Echinacea purpurea Sombrero Hot Pink. Reaching 9 to 12 in. in containers and 21 in. in the garden, it truly is a shorty. Its 3-in. glowing pink petals last a long time atop sturdy stems. It's a cute, easy-to-schedule summer-flowering perennial that doesn't require vernalization to bloom. It's from Florensis, and Green Leaf is the only one carrying it.

Kurtz Farms made a splash at their first OFA Short Course with a very professional-looking—and large—booth. Originators of the Urban Gardener program, the Kurtz operation saw a great deal of interest from Short Course attendees in their line of appealing and easy-to-use patio veggie containers and cages, trellises, strawberry pots and especially Halloween-themed mum containers.

John Friel breaks the confines of his monthly column to report on a few educational sessions he was lucky enough to catch between bouts of tongue-wagging, client buttering and show peeping. Another year, another great OFA Short Course.

I suspect most attendees can't make every educational session they'd like. I sure can't. Dedicating the middle of each day to the tradeshow helps, but it's tough to schmooze, be schmoozed, and catch pertinent lectures. Ergo, seminars described here were not necessarily superior to those not described; these are simply what fit around meeting, greeting, floor-walking and booth-manning.

### **Green Roofs: A Whole New Market**

Three experts approached the subject from very different angles. Rob Berghage has years of data from Penn State tests. Michael Furbish, Maryland, oversees medium to massive commercial and residential installations. Matt Horn's upscale New York garden center vegetates homes, doghouses, playhouses and mailboxes.

Green roofs mitigate stormwater runoff, flooding, erosion, pollution and the urban "heat island" effect. They're trendy, endowing bragging rights on homeowners and businesses. They represent good green money at several industry levels. Big spreads are most apt to benefit the planet, but even small jobs help the environment and your business.

As green roofs segue from nouveau to normal, said Michael, "the industry will move toward lower pricing—a commodity model." That's a natural progression. Do-it-yourself kits are already available.

But in these stratified systems whose parts must work together, the key player is the plant layer. So where will price pressure squeeze hardest? Probably on the plants. Roof vegetation is groundcover, elevated. Builders will always want the plants for less; some grower will inevitably oblige.

Try not to be that guy. Plants make green roofs green. Plants make green roofs work. The most visible, most functional element is no place to skimp.

### **The Latest and Greatest Perennials: Production Tips for Success**

Despite fine work by Eric Runkle from the University of Michigan and Sonali Padhye from the University of Florida, this session disappointed. The title implied advice on pots, media, fertility, irrigation, pinching, PGRs—all facets of successful production. Nope, not included. The focus was mostly daylength response, with occasional vernalization recommendations.

It was all valuable information, well-framed and backed by appropriate comparison pictures, but it simply didn't match the title or description. Call it "Light Requirements to Initiate Flowering in

Perennials," and fewer might have walked in—or out.

I stayed and was heartened to hear praise for some favorites. Sonali lauded the Limerock coreopsis series, sort of. “Fantastic,” she said. “Great performance,” she said. “Not hardy,” she said. All (sigh) true. And Erik discussed recent gaillardia introductions like the Gallo series, splendid in both pot and border.

### **Woman Speak: The Difference Between Selling to Women and Selling to Men**

At retail, “female customer” is almost redundant. How to reach her? Listen, answers Holly Buchanan, blogger and author of “The Soccer Mom Myth.”

“People listen 30% and talk 70%,” Buchanan said. “Reverse that.” We’ve all been guilty of what she called “marketing to me,” i.e., focusing on what we like, not on what matters to she who wields the credit card.

With contagious energy and humor, Buchanan made excellent points, such as the following nuggets: Men like to show knowledge and solve problems; women prefer to share both. Men approach purchases competitively: What will this do for me? Will it enhance my status? A woman’s point of view is more cooperative, collaborative. Men make snap decisions; women shop, research and compare obsessively, taking forever to choose. Be patient. Listen.

It was a revelation. Who knew the two major genders think differently? But seriously, knowing how important female consumers are, I picked Holly over Allan Armitage’s session, “The Plant is Still Important,” which I’m sure was superb. That’s why he’s usually up last, to keep us in town.

### **Top Twenty Flowers Every Greenhouse Should Grow for the Landscape Contractor**

As horticulturist for The Brickman Group, a landscaper with branches in 29 states, H. Bruce Hellerick is fussy. He wants easily transplanted, competitively priced, low- or no-maintenance plants that resist pests, flower continually and look great up-close or from the Interstate. Roundup-ready would also be nice.

Brickman uses mostly seed annuals—which are not my shtick, so no big take-home for me. Bruce’s faves include petunias, impatiens, salvia, begonia, ipomoea, coleus, celosia, vinca and zinnia. Only purple fountain grass (*Pennisetum x advena* Rubrum) made my antennae quiver.

Most cannas have a virus, Bruce said, and no one’s cleaning them up. He asked, “Why aren’t the powers that be coming down on bulb producers?” Hmmm ... who regulates pathogens that don’t threaten food crops or forests? The marketplace. If gardeners stop buying canna by ones and twos, if landscapers cancel thousands, producers will act.

Bruce joined the chorus urging national trials throughout America. Most such proposals are for perennial trials, funded by breeders’ fees. Bruce believes the public might pay handsomely to see them, making them self-sustaining. As a Hemingway character said, “Isn’t it pretty to think so.”

## Should I Grow or Buy? The Small Grower's Quandary

This panel discussion got lots of audience feedback. Presenters were George Lucas and Joe Moore from Lucas Greenhouses; Stephen Barlow from Barlow Flower Farm; Frank Fernicola, Jr. from Fairfield Garden Center; Scott Longfellow from Longfellow's Greenhouse; and Jerry Dill from Dill's Greenhouse. Pardon the generic composite, but comments came so thick and fast, I couldn't always tell who said what.

"Find your niche," said one presenter. "We buy what we can't grow well," said another. "I've been too bullheaded to let someone do it for me, but if your numbers aren't adding up, something's got to go."

The panel wrestled with the challenges of vertical integration, i.e., separating wholesale from retail. Conclusion: Make it a vendor-customer relationship to keep the records straight. "On paper, we sell to our retail section. It lets us keep a handle on things," Jerry advised. When busy, "Hire extra people. Try not to steal employees" from one area to fortify another.

All agreed on one of my pet peeves: Know your costs. Growing their own, "People fool themselves," said Scott. "They don't figure labor, or how little that person got done." One panelist admitted, "I'm not practicing everything I preach."

Bottom line? I'm not sure there was one. More questions were raised than answered, but that's valuable, too. Few rules apply to all situations.

Those five sessions were all I managed. Sorry, I missed "Chunks and Boing-Boings," which had to do with decorating. Maybe next year.

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## Athens Select

Athens Select, that line of heat- and humidity-tolerant plants selected by Dr. Allan Armitage of the University of Georgia, added four new varieties for 2009—two gaillardias and two pennisetums. Gaillardia Georgia Sunset (pictured) has bicolor gold and orange flowers that measure up to 2 in. across. Plants grow to about 18 in. in the landscape. Gaillardia Georgia Yellow is similar, but features bright butter-yellow flowers. The finish time for both from a 72-count plug is eight weeks. Hardy to Zone 7b. Pennisetum Princess Molly is a second-generation of Prince, with thin, deep burgundy leaves, but only grows 14 to 20 in. tall (Prince grows to 6 ft.). And Princess Caroline has brilliant purple foliage on 3 ft. plants. It's basically a compact, improved version of Princess, with better diseased resistance and sturdier growth. All are hardy to Zone 8. [www.athensselect.com](http://www.athensselect.com)

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## Svensson Americas

Growers have never been more interested in energy curtains, and Sweden's Ludvig Svensson continues to deliver cutting-edge energy, shade and photoperiod curtain materials. Among their latest offerings is FLS, a shadecloth designed to replace the typical black fabric you might lay over the top of your greenhouse, such as southern growers who use shade to cut both light and heat during the summer months. FLS's combination of white and aluminum material lets in up to 30% less heat gain. Svensson's Kurt Parbst says this means you

could use a lower shade factor (for instance 40%) and get the heat reduction benefits of 60% shade, but the increased growth from more light. And it's less expensive than their OLS fabric. As Kurt colorfully puts it, "Hot and dark are good for a cup of coffee, but not for the inside of the greenhouse."

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### **Emerald Coast Growers**

Cheri Markowitz of Florida's Emerald Coast Growers was on hand at OFA to tout her family's broad history in the business. Did you know that Emerald Coast was founded by Cheri's parents, David and Wyona Babikow, and that the Babikow family history in plants goes back to 1875? Paul and Don Babikow are the third generation to run the original family nursery, Babikow Greenhouses, in Maryland; their brother Oliver Wendell "Buzz" Babikow founded Greenleaf Enterprises (now part of Aris) in Pennsylvania. David and Wyona moved to Florida and started Emerald Coast in 1991, with sons Mark and Paul. Whew! Anyway, Cheri was also showing off some of their new ornamental grasses, including chasmanthium River Mist (pictured), a variegated northern Sea Oats that makes a great specimen plant in the landscape. It grows to 2 to 3 ft. tall and is hardy in Zones 5-9.

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### **TrueLeaf**

The Herb Casaverde Warm Feet Plant Starter gets GrowerTalks' unofficial award for the best product for small growers. Herb Casaverde, TrueLeaf's cartoon representation of the typical small grower, gets his picture on the front of this device, which is a small water heater designed to warm water for 80 sq. ft. of propagation bench. The instructions are simple: Hang it up, connect the hoses, roll out the Roll-N-Grow propagation mat (sold separately), plug it into a 110 outlet, and get "soft heat" just like the big, expensive systems. You can easily connect it to a thermostat or timer, too. At just \$499, even a home propagator could use it. [www.trueleaf.net](http://www.trueleaf.net)

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### **MagniMoist Plant Inserts**

Abe Hansen shows off MagniMoist Planter Inserts. Made from kenaf plant fibers and a 100% recycled binder, these inserts fit into the bottom of pots and basket. The way Abe describes it, water won't penetrate the insert until the potting soil above gets fully saturated. Only when that happens does MagniMoist's kenaf fibers become porous, allowing excess water out of the pot. That helps a consumer provide maximum water to her plants without drowning them. [www.magnimoist.com](http://www.magnimoist.com)

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### **BASF**

We had a lunch meeting with some folks from BASF, including Steve Larson, their National Ornamentals Account Manager. A large bit of our discussion revolved around BASF's recent acquisition of Whitmire Micro-gen, which is known for its line of aerosol greenhouse foggers. We wondered, will BASF continue or even expand that product category? Steve replied in the affirmative, saying that BASF has already put six of their active ingredients into the hands of Whitmire scientists, so they can develop aerosol versions. This opens up a whole new avenue of pest management options, especially for smaller growers or those needing to treat isolated areas, such as quonsets.

Along with chemical products, BASF has partnered with Ann Chase of Chase Horticultural Research to create a very cool, very simple "Best Fungicide Options" wheel. You turn the pointer to the disease you want to control, and the fungicide options and timing instructions pop up in windows. Best of all, it's not just a BASF sales tool; it includes all the leading chemical products. If you want one, go to [www.bestplants.com](http://www.bestplants.com) and put in your zip code to find your BASF rep, who can hook you up.

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## Daniels Plant Food

Daniels Plant Food combined fun and function when they hosted a reception and panel discussion for growers on Sunday evening of the Short Course. Along with growers Duke Stockslager and Mark Elzinga, who offered their real-world experiences with Daniels Plant Food, the educational portion of the evening featured the members of Daniels' new Scientific Advisory Board: Dr. Paul Nelson, professor emeritus at North Carolina State University; Dr. Allan Armitage, professor of Horticultural Science at the University of Georgia; and Ron Adams, former director of technology for Ball Seed and now an industry consultant. The three-member Advisory Board was announced July 9. Seeing Soleil

It was launched at Pack Trials in sort of a quiet, last-minute way, but now we get a good look at it: petunia Soleil Purple, marketed by Australia's Anthony Tesselaar and distributed in North America by Selecta. Soleil is said to be extremely drought tolerant—in fact, the less you water it, the more it blooms. This is Tesselaar CEO Rod Thorpe showing it off. Interestingly, Soleil was bred in Holland, he says—hardly a drought-ridden country.

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## Syngenta Industry Issues Roundtable

*GrowerTalks* | *Green Profit* and the other industry trade press attended a breakfast hosted by Syngenta, the purpose of which was to both fill us in on what they've been up to, and allow us to ask them questions of our own choosing. Representing Syngenta were numerous bigwigs, including Jeff Cox, Tim Kroenke, Mark Waltham, David Stanley and Joel Goldsmith (who probably never thought he'd get lumped in with Syngenta bigwigs, but now he is one).

Jeff Cox, Global Head, Lawn & Garden, and Head, Global Business Development, outlined for us the three pillars under which Syngenta has been organizing its business units, in a quest to have a very "customer-centric" approach to its structure.

The first is Flowers Professional, which includes flowers, professional products (pest management), Fafard (potting mixes) and Bioline, their biological controls division. Second is Golf & Landscape (Syngenta has 30% market share in turf control products in the U.S.). And the third is Consumer. The goal is to partner with consumer companies to better, or more directly, serve the end consumer.

During the Q&A, we asked the panel to elaborate on this topic of consumers.

Joel Goldsmith answered that Syngenta is not only trying to understand things from a professional grower standpoint, but from a consumer standpoint as well. To that end, they've been doing consumer research to find ways to work better with the entire retail sector.

"I don't believe the consumer adequately knows what to do with our product when they buy it," Joel says. "They look at it, they like it, they take it home, and they either keep it indoors or they plant it somewhere. But they do that without a real understanding of what to expect from the plant, where to put it, how to take care of it .... And I think that's one of the biggest areas that, as an industry, we can grow: finding a way to provide that information.

"That was one of the things that attracted our company to Syngenta," he continued. "This is a company that is making the effort, making the commitment, making the investment into the



marketplace. And is willing to continue to invest—to find a way to do consumer education and develop consumer products. That’s why we have a consumer ‘pillar’ within Lawn & Garden—that’s their purpose.”

Tim Kroenke, President of the NAFTA Flowers Business Operations, cited the launch of the “Dolcinea” brand of personal-sized watermelon, bred by Syngenta. “Essentially, by understanding consumer trends better – smaller, single-head households that don’t need a 15 lb. watermelon – looking back in the genetic diversity that we have and bringing that to market and branding it at the retail shelf. We’re doing other similar things around the world on the vegetable side.”

Added Jeff Cox, “If this industry is really going to take itself to the next level with the hobby gardening segment, and really have plants as a consumable, then we really need to understand that marketplace much deeper than what we do today.”

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